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AUTHOR	Collins, Lisa
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ABSTRACT

Test anxiety is exceedingly common among learners in adult basic education. Any one or more of the following can cause individuals to experience test anxiety: learned behavior resulting from the expectations of parents, teachers, or significant others; associations that students have built between grades or test performance and personal worth; fear of disappointing or alienating friends, family, and/or parents because of poor performance; and feelings of lack of control and/or inability to change one's present life situation. When working with anxious students, establishing rapport is vital. Some helpful tips teachers can convey to their students are as follows: avoid large amounts of caffeine before tests; eat a light meal; dress comfortably; be prepared; be positive; take breaks when needed; read directions and questions carefully; use available time wisely; look for key terms in questions and trick questions; make an outline before answering an essay question; and practice with sample tests before the test day. To help alleviate students' test-related stress, teachers should teach both testing techniques and relaxation techniques. Anxiety management training is among the best ways to help students reduce their test-related anxiety. The training consists of three components: relaxation training; construction of an anxiety hierarchy; and systematic desensitization of anxiety. The final step is to help students develop realistic and positive attitudes toward school. (MN)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Teacher To Teacher

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Effective Strategies for Dealing with Test Anxiety

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by Lisa Collins, Ohio Literacy Resource Center

All educators have undoubtedly seen the signs of test anxiety: students pulling on their hair or twisting it into curls when a test is announced; palsy in the hands or feet; a profane word from the normally reserved student; students wringing their hands, repetitively drawing a straight line, or snapping at fellow students. The list goes on and on. In adult basic education students, these and other similar reactions are exceedingly common. Often their educational experiences have been negative, which the students attribute to internal factors (I'm stupid). If they have had any positive experiences, these successes are often attributed to external factors (it was an easy test). Unless specific steps are taken to interrupt this cycle of failure, these individuals have little chance of attaining the goals set for education (getting their GED) and/or career (finding a new or better job).

Sources of Test Anxiety

The source of test anxiety is different for different people, but in general it can be attributed to one of four general areas:

1) learned behavior resulting from the expectations of parents, teachers or significant others in the student's life.
2) association the student has built between grades or test performance and personal worth.
3) fear of disappointing or alienating friends, family and/or parents because of poor performance or imperfect academic ability.
4) feeling a lack of control and/or an inability to change one's present life situation.

Any one, or a combination, of these areas can cause an individual to experience test anxiety. If we can help students work through their personal issues, they will be better able to achieve their educational or occupational goals.

Tips for Working with Test Anxious Students

When working with test anxious students, establishing rapport is vital. The personality characteristics of warmth, empathy, and genuineness will go a long way in building such a relationship. This kind of relationship creates a bond between teacher and student. This bond will enable the teacher to reach the student at a much deeper level. In this context it is helpful for the teacher to convey to the student that anxiety is a learned behavior that is experienced by many people and that it is not an indication that they are "going crazy." Teachers should build on the student's new maturity and the fact that they are not the same person who failed at testing in school. After the student accepts this notion, the teacher can move on to teaching techniques to help the student deal with some of their test anxiety. Some helpful tips teachers can convey to their students include:

1) **Say no to no-doz.** Using large amounts of caffeine prior to the test can add to stress because you often become too "wired" to stay focused on the test in front of you.
2) **Eat light.** Avoid food a couple of hours before a test. When you eat, more blood has to move to the digestive system and thus is taken away from your brain. This results in drowsiness and a slowing of information-processing abilities. Instead, take a walk to get the blood moving through your system.

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3) **Dress for success.** Wear comfortable clothes to the test. It will help you feel more relaxed throughout the test process.

4) **Be prepared.** Show up for your test early with pens, pencils, erasers and any other materials you need for the test.

5) **Be positive.** Expect to do well. Remember, you are prepared for this test.

6) **Take a break when needed.** Whenever tension threatens to overwhelm you, close your eyes and picture yourself in your calm, peaceful place. When you open your eyes, you will once again be focused on the test.

7) **Read directions and questions carefully.** Be sure to read the questions as they are, not as you would like them to be. Keep the directions in mind when answering the questions.

8) **Know how long you have to complete the test and then use your time wisely.** Look over the entire test before answering any questions. This will help you plan your strategy of attack - which questions to answer first, which to skip and come back to later, etc.

9) **Look for key terms in the questions.** Often there are clues to answers in question stems or in other questions on the test.

10) **Watch out for trick questions.** Read very carefully any questions with the word "no" or "not" because double negative can be tricky. Keep an eye out for modifiers that make the statement false.

11) **Remember, answering essay questions can be difficult if you don't have a plan.** Before you begin to write, make an outline and then check it to make sure that you are answering the question fully.

12) **Practice, practice, practice.** Sample tests not only help the students learn the material, but they also give the students a great feel for what to expect on test day.

Teaching Students How to Relax

In order to help alleviate test-related stress teachers need to teach both testing techniques and relaxation techniques. The first step in this process is helping students understand the physiology of their anxiety as simply the building up of tension and worry. Once students understand why they are feeling anxious, the teacher can begin to help them deal with those feelings. Physical relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, desensitization, and positive self-talk can help students overcome their test anxiety.

Anxiety Management Training

One of the best ways to help students reduce their test-related anxiety is through the use of anxiety management training. Anxiety management training is composed of three parts: 1) relaxation training, 2) building an anxiety hierarchy, and 3) systematic desensitization. Each of these stages will be reviewed here. The following techniques can be used with individual students or with groups of students. These techniques have been found to be extremely effective with individuals suffering from test anxiety; however, before using the techniques, you should review the process with a counselor and, if possible, experience the process yourself.

1) The first step in the process is teaching the student relaxation techniques. In relaxation training, the leader uses a very quiet, soft, pleasant voice to teach progressive muscular relaxation.

   ⇒ To begin, ask the student to close his/her eyes and begin taking some deep breaths. Instruct the student to keep her/his teeth slightly separated to release tension in the jaws and neck. He/she should visualize the air as it is breathed in and out.

   ⇒ After focusing on his/her breathing for a couple of minutes, the student should be guided to visualize a relaxing situation, such as sitting by a lake or wandering through a beautiful field. It is best if you allow the student to pick his/her own situation, but when working with groups it is often easier and more effective to describe a situation to them. It is important that the student reach a state of peaceful calm. Allow the student to absorb the peace of this relaxing place for a few minutes. Once the student has become calm and peaceful in this situation, it is time for the next step.

   ⇒ The student is instructed to visualize a given part of the body, for example the upper right arm. While visualizing that part of the body, the student is instructed to tighten the muscles in that area. The student should hold that tightness for three seconds, then relax those same muscles. This process is repeated two more times. While tensing and relaxing the muscle group, the leader reminds the student to experience the difference between tense and relaxed.

   ⇒ This process of tensing and relaxing the muscle groups then continues throughout each muscle group. The arm muscles are relaxed first, followed by the head, the neck and shoulders, the back, abdomen, and thorax and then the lower limbs. Throughout this relaxation exercise, the leader speaks in a soft,

quiet, soothing voice. This progressive muscle relaxation process should take about ten minutes.

⇒ Next, it is time for the final stage of the relaxation. During this final stage, the leader guides the student back to his/her relaxing image from the beginning of the session. While "in" this calm, peaceful place the leader encourages the student to practice positive affirmations such as "I am capable of achieving my goals," "I am a good person," or "I am going to pass the test." Students can create and voice their own positive affirmations during this time as well.

⇒ After about 10 minutes, the leader should begin to guide students back from this relaxed state by reminding them that they have done a lot of good work and that it is time to bring their awareness back into the room, feeling calm and refreshed. Do not give them a definite countdown, but rather simply ask them to open their eyes when they feel ready.

In the beginning sessions, relaxation is the only goal. The student is encouraged to practice this relaxation process outside of class as often as possible (30 minutes each day is best).

2) After the student has become comfortable with the relaxation process (it will probably take a couple of sessions), the next step is to help him/her create an anxiety hierarchy. When creating an anxiety hierarchy, the leader helps construct a (written) ranked list of situations that elicit increasing degrees of anxiety or avoidance. First students might brainstorm anxiety-provoking situations. Remind students that those are likely to differ among individuals. After ideas are generated, students can rank their lists from the worst situations that the student can imagine down to the associated situation that evokes the least amount anxiety. After creating this anxiety hierarchy, the person is ready to begin the desensitization process.

3) The third and final stage of the anxiety management process is desensitization of the anxiety inducing situations.

⇒ The desensitization process begins with the student's reaching complete relaxation (with his/her eyes closed). In this state, the student is guided to the calm and peaceful place they use in their relaxation exercises.

⇒ While in this relaxed state, the student is asked to imagine the least anxiety-arousing scene on his/her hierarchy of situations that has been developed. The leader describes the scene, and the student imagines (for about ten seconds) being in the scene.

⇒ If the student remains calm while visualizing this situation, the leader asks the him/her to visualize the next least anxiety-arousing scene on the hierarchy.

⇒ The leader continues to move progressively up the hierarchy until the student signals that he or she is experiencing anxiety, at which time the scene is terminated. The student is then guided back to his/her calm and peaceful relaxation image.

⇒ When the student is able to remain in a relaxed state while imagining the scene that was formerly the most disturbing and anxiety producing, the leader continues to guide the student progressively higher on the anxiety hierarchy. The leader needs to move the student up the hierarchy gradually (between two and five items per session). It is very important that the student understand that if at any time his/her level of anxiety begins to increase, he/she should signal the leader who will then stop the visualization.

⇒ Over a period of several sessions, the student will, ideally, be able to imagine the highest item in the hierarchy without discomfort.

⇒ Again, homework and follow-up are essential components of successful desensitization. Students should be advised to practice selected relaxation procedures daily, at which time they visualize scenes completed in the previous session.

⇒ Gradually, the students should also expose themselves to real-life situations (for example, practice tests) as a further way to manage their anxieties.

Example of Anxiety Management Training

The following example can be used as a guideline for your relaxation exercises. To begin, have the student relax in a chair with his/her eyes closed.

I would like to begin today by having you focus on your breathing. Begin to breathe slowly and deeply, filling your lungs with air.....Exhale slowly and gently force all air from your lungs..... If you begin to feel lightheaded, that is all right. It means that you are starting to relax...Give your body a chance to relax...feel the comfort and heaviness.... Continue to breathe deeply and as you do, imagine you can see the air flowing around you...As you breathe in and out watch the movement of the air...Let your full concentration rest on the movement

of the air....Each time you breathe in, feel the peace that enters into your body....When you breathe out, imagine all the tension flowing out of your body....With each breath, you become more and more relaxed....Your arms and legs begin to feel heavy and warm as you relax even more....With each breath, the tension flows from your body and you are achieving a deeper relaxation....As you relax further, notice the tingling sensation that comes over your body. Enjoy the good feeling of relaxing and letting go.....As you relax more, your body gets heavier and warmer. Enjoy this feeling, secure in the knowledge that you have brought it about. You are in control of your body.

I want you now to concentrate on your upper right arm....Visualize the muscles that are there....I want you now to tense those muscles as much as you can...Hold that tension....Now relax those muscles....Feel the tension drain from those muscles...Feel them relaxing....Go ahead and tense them again....Feel the tension building there...and release it....Feel yourself relaxing with that muscle...Tense that muscle one last time....and release the last bit of tension stored there...That muscle is now completely relaxed....Now, tense your lower arm...hold the tension...(*repeat this procedure with all of the muscle groups until the entire body has been relaxed*).

Stay relaxed...Feel the peacefulness...You are calm and comfortable...You may find it helpful to imagine a scene that is personally calm and relaxing, something we'll refer to as your pleasant scene ..You might want to see yourself sitting by a clear blue mountain lake or walking through a field of golden wheat that is blowing gently in the wind...Do you have your image...Fine. Now, I want you think of a 0 to 100 scale where 0 indicates complete relaxation and 100 maximum tension. Tell me approximately where you'd place yourself on that scale...(*Leader is advised to look for a rating that reflects considerable calm and relaxation, often in the range of 15-2. That level may not be reached during the first sessions, but should be before you start the desensitization process*). Fine. Soon I shall ask you to imagine a scene (*this is where you insert the desensitization scenario*). After you hear the description of the situation, please imagine it as vividly as you can, through your own eyes, as if you were actually there. Try to include all the details in the scene....While you're visualizing the situation, you may continue feeling as relaxed as you are now. If so, that's good....After 5, 10, or 15 seconds, I'll ask you to stop imagining the scene and return to your pleasant image and to just relax. But if you begin to feel even the slightest increase in anxiety or tension, please signal this to me by raising your left forefinger. When you do this I'll step in and ask you to stop imagining the situation and then will help you get relaxed once more (*by going back to the calm, peaceful place*). It's important that you indicate tension to me in this way, as we want to maximize your being exposed to fearful situations without feeling anxious. Okay? (*Here the leader describes the scene of the student's least anxiety-arousing situation as listed on his/her anxiety hierarchy, for example, driving to the testing site on test day.*)

While you visualize being in this scene, say to yourself, "deep within my mind I can visualize and experience myself as comfortable and still."..."My mind is calm and quiet."..."I feel at peace with myself."..."I am now relaxed and alert."...Now picture yourself having just finished the test...Everything went well...Say to yourself "I am completely satisfied with my performance." ..."My performance was perfect."..."I am grateful to myself for adequately preparing to perform my best."...Relive this moment in your mind....Enjoy all of the sensations associated with it - the sights...sounds...smells... feelings... physical touching...everything....Just enjoy it totally....At this moment, you are the best.... Congratulations on a job well done.

> At your own pace now, bring yourself out of the state of deep relaxation....Start to bring your awareness levels up...Begin to wiggle your fingers and toes....Take some deep breaths.....Tell yourself "I am relaxed, refreshed and full of energy."....Stretch out and be ready to face the rest of the day with a positive attitude..... Remember, you are in control.....You alone are responsible for what happens in your life....Go out and make each day a great one....Make each venture a successful one....Enjoy yourself, and be at peace with yourself and the world around you....Whenever you are ready, open your eyes.

This sample illustrates one technique that can be used with your adult students, but we must remember that improved study habits and learning relaxation skills is generally not enough to fully reduce students' test anxiety. In addition to such techniques, the students need to develop realistic and positive attitudes toward school. Many years of failing tests most likely has destroyed any positive attitudes the student ever had toward the education system.

Rebuilding Positive Attitudes

In order to help rebuild this positive attitude, teachers need to realize several things. First, teachers need to understand that the student's ability to perform well on a test is not only an educational accomplishment, but it is also a social and psychological accomplishment. How we feel about ourselves and school alters our performance. Successful students tend to be praised by teachers and esteemed by their classmates. Such praise allows them to build a positive self image and a foundation of confidence that helps to shape future performance. In the same way, failure feeds upon itself.

Second, teachers need to understand how change in a student occurs. Adult students are more likely to change if they feel a sense of personal gain, security, status,

prestige, responsibility, or opportunity for more money or better life conditions. Therefore, the teacher's goal becomes building a commitment to change. In order to effect change, students need to practice skills that testify to their commitment. Such skills can be as simple as completing assignments or coming to class on a regular basis. These ingrained attitudes are hard to change, but positive support and incremental successes will result in a gradual change.

There are many obstacles standing between the typical adult student and his/her ultimate goals. We, as their teachers, have a responsibility to help them to not just go around, but to move through those obstacles. By helping them move through instead of around these obstacles, we have not only set the precedent, but have given them the skills they will need to help them deal with future obstacles in their lives.

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